

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH
BRIGADIER GENERAL MICHAEL WALSH,
U.S. ARMY CORPS OF ENGINEERS, GULF REGION DIVISION
(VIA TELECONFERENCE)

MODERATOR: TIM KILBRIDE, NEW MEDIA DIRECTORATE,
OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY OF DEFENSE, PUBLIC AFFAIRS

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MR. KILBRIDE: To welcome you all to the Department of Defense Bloggers
Roundtable for Wednesday, May 23rd, 2007. My name's Tim Kilbride; I'm in the New
Media Directorate of the Office of the Secretary of Defense, Public Affairs. I'll be
moderating today's call. And we're honored to have as our guest Brigadier General

Michael Walsh, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Gulf Region Division. And just a reminder, please state your name and blog or organization when you pose a question.

And that said, General, thanks for joining us, and if you have any opening statements, please go ahead.

GEN. WALSH: Good morning. Sorry that I'm a little bit late. Andrew, good to hear you're on the other end again.

MR. LUBIN: Yeah, General, good to -- and nice to be doing this from here instead of from the Green Zone -- (laughs) -- with apologies to you.

GEN. WALSH: Well, that's exactly right.

I think many of you may have heard me before, working on the Iraq reconstruction mission. It's been quite the -- quite a challenge. So far, they've spent about \$13 billion that we're -- that we're working with the Corps of Engineers and a few others on the reconstruction mission. We've completed eight and a half billion (dollars), and we still have another three and a half billion (dollars) that we -- that we're continuing to work, using the Iraqi reconstruction fund -- funds that the Congress appropriated for us.

Some of the difficulties, of course, is that we were unaware of how poorly the infrastructure was when we came here in 2003, and if you think about it, it really has been neglected for -- 25 years, as well as the 12 years that we had the quarantine. So we've been working really hard to bring the electrical system up to 12 hours across the country -- the oil, water, health system, things of that sort.

The requirement that we sought from the World Bank was there would be about \$100 billion to bring the Iraqi infrastructure up to -- up to standards, and the American taxpayers contributed a total of 22 billion (dollars). So you can see it was really our plan when we came in in 2003 was just to jump-start the construction of the Iraq infrastructure, and then the rest of it, between the 22 billion (dollars) and the 100 billion (dollars) was supposed to be picked up by donor nations and then the -- and then the government of Iraq. So we're -- we're finishing up the use of the Iraq reconstruction funds and to pick up that gap from 20 billion (dollars) to 100 billion (dollars) will have to be the donor nations and the Iraqi government. And you can hear a lot of discussions with trying to help the Iraqi government spend their capital budget so that they can pick up this mission of reconstruction.

And with that, I'd be happy to answer your questions.

MR. KILBRIDE: All right. Andrew, you were first on line.

ANDREW LUBIN: Yeah, but David, you got to go? You want to run? Because you've got jury duty.

DAVID AXE: Yeah, sure. General, thanks for taking the time to speak with us. I really appreciate it. This is David Axe. I blog for "Danger," among others. Can you hear me okay?

GEN. WALSH: Yup, got you fine.

MR. AXE: Great. So I understand you were going to speak about the health infrastructure. Are you still in a position to comment on that, hospitals and clinics?

GEN. WALSH: Certainly. We have worked on about 20 -- 20 hospitals across Iraq. A lot of it had to do with renovations. In particular, I was talking about the Najaf Teaching Hospital. That's a nine -- correction, a seven-story building with 13 operating rooms, and we did a complete renovation that we did with -- in three different phases, moving people around the different portions of the hospital. That included renovating the doctors' residence and auxiliary buildings, and we did all the systems -- the heating, ventilation -- heating, ventilation, air conditioning, oxygen systems, the reverse osmosis water -- (word inaudible) -- clean air systems. So it was a pretty top-to-bottom project. That one was about \$14 million.

The other things that we're working on is 138 primary health clinics, and we're building those throughout -- throughout the country. Forty-six are in the north; 34 in the central area, and then 58 down south. And pretty much those are going to be a turnkey facility. It'll have x-ray rooms, dental chairs, pretty much -- (word inaudible) -- pretty much everything that you would need to run a small health clinic. And again, as I mentioned, that'll be turnkey and turned over to the minister of health, where he'll supply the doctors, the nurses, the maintenance staff and, of course, the consumables.

(Cross talk.)

MR. AXE: Sorry, go on.

GEN. WALSH: I was going to say, the big project that we're working on is down in Basra. It's the Basra Children's Hospital. That's a 94-bed facility and, again, it's a teaching hospital, and so we're going to have to build a residence hall for the doctors and for -- for both the students and the doctors and the staff. And that's about 51 percent complete, and we'll have that one open -- correction, finished construction in the July frame, turn it over -- July '08, that is -- and to turn that over to the Ministry of Health, and then they'll commission it and it'll probably be open to the public in the -- in the end of 2008.

MR. AXE: General, how are you feeling about the -- the Ministry of Health's ability to sustain these facilities that you're helping renovate for them?

GEN. WALSH: Well, as -- as in a lot of things that we're working with in the government, their logistics systems are -- are difficult; they're running shortages on a lot

of -- on a lot of consumables. But again, they're still learning how to put these systems into place and make sure that they get the doctors and nurses and the supplies to the right -- to the right place.

One of the things that we're concerned with, of course, is as we turn these facilities over that have generators, you know, sometimes they're not able to get a fuel truck to go through and the generator, the back-up generator will go down. So there are -- there are some problems with getting the full maintenance and logistics things in place. But generally, again, I was visiting a hospital just the other day. The doctors and nurses were in place and they were taking care of Iraqi people as they were coming in the door.

MR. AXE: Thank you very much, General.

MR. KILBRIDE: Okay, Andrew, it's back to you, if --

MR. LUBIN: Yeah. General, appreciate the time on this.

Last week we were talking to Doug Brinkley, the undersecretary of Defense for economic reconstruction. He's trying to get the heavy industries and the old state industries up and running. Are you able to -- are you working with him on point-by-point, or are you guys kind of going your direction and he's going his? What kind of coordination do you have with his -- with his group?

GEN. WALSH: Well, we work with the Brinkley group fairly -- fairly closely. Bob Love is the -- is his guy he keeps here on the ground and we talk with each other every couple of months to make sure that we're -- we're in sync. One of the things that Mr. Brinkley needs to do is to get additional electricity out to those state-owned enterprises, and particularly, as you know, out in Al Anbar on the cement factory, and also the phosphate as well. And that's been one of the most difficult challenges here in Iraq, is working on the electrical systems.

As you know, we are at about 12 to 13 hours of power, around the -- around the country as it is now, so we're meeting about half the needs. And certainly, to run a phosphate plant and a cement plant takes a tremendous amount of electricity to make that happen.

MR. LUBIN: Oh, that's for sure.

GEN. WALSH: And so we originally tried to put that -- think about putting those on the electrical grid, but I think Mr. Brinkley's now thinking about bringing generators into those plants.

MR. LUBIN: Okay. Staying on Anbar, because that's where the phosphate and cement plants are, with the -- with the Sunnis and the Marines working together, are you finding it better security in Anbar compared to, say, up in the north, or what's happening in Anbar, compared to the rest of the country as far as pace is concerned?

GEN. WALSH: I think, you know, it's pretty much work on the reconstruction sites. In regards to the security, I can just report what I've heard from the battle update assessments. And frankly, everybody is -- is quite excited on how well the Marines have been doing, working with the -- with the Sunnis in going after al Qaeda as they're coming -- coming across the border, I think, and the number of attacks and casualties from those attacks have gone down significantly, I think, since the last time you've been here, Andrew, and it's really just a tremendous -- tremendous amount of work and success that they have out there.

MR. LUBIN: Appreciate it. Okay, one more quick question.

GEN. WALSH: And pretty much I think back in the -- back in the August time frame they would have like 20 attacks a day, and they're down to about three, in Ramadi.

MR. LUBIN: That's great. What's the -- what kind of oil production is Iraq doing now? Are they still talking 2.1 (million barrels per day), or have they been able to jack it up from there?

GEN. WALSH: We're in the 2.6 million barrels a day.

MR. LUBIN: Oh, excellent. Okay.

GEN. WALSH: They're trying -- I think we're up at 3 (million), but the difficult -- we have the capacity to go up to 3 (million). The difficulty right now is making sure that the pipelines stay intact. So I think we met our goal. Our U.S. goal was 3 million barrels a day. We've met that capacity; we've just not been able to, the Iraqis, to work their piece in getting that exported.

MR. LUBIN: Good. Appreciate that. That's very -- that's very good news.

MR. KILBRIDE: Great. Jarred, if you have a question, please go ahead.

JARRED FISHMAN: Yes, thank you. Good afternoon, General.

If you could give like a weekly report on the good news coming out of Iraq, what would be the one thing you would want the American citizens back here to know which they probably don't know from the mainstream media reporting?

GEN. WALSH: Well, I think that -- let me just stay on the electrical piece, if I may. A lot of -- a lot of reporters, you know, report that there's not enough electricity, or people are working around in the dark. And I think, as I talk to my friends back there and I first tell them that Iraq never had -- never did have 24-hours level of power. So when the reporters write that, you know, it was "darkness took over after the power system went down," I think that's not an accurate statement. Most of the -- if you fly over

Baghdad, and I know you have, Andrew, at night -- you will see that Baghdad is well lit up.

There's a lot of spot generators -- they call them generator guides -- every couple of street corners, so we'll have them in place, and they'll hook up to those generators. So they do have power that they can run their air conditioners, refrigerators and things of that sort. What they don't have is power off of the grid. But what's written, I read is, you know, Baghdad gets plunged into darkness after seven hours, and that -- and that's not accurate at all.

MR. FISHMAN: No. In fact, I was amazed when I was -- in April how lit-up, flying from Ramadi to Fallujah to, you know, out west, how light it was at night, at 01, 02. It's truly amazing. Not like here yet, but amazing compared to, say January, the differences.

MR. KILBRIDE: All right. We have plenty of time for follow-up questions, if --

MR. AXE: General, on your primary health care clinics, you're working on 130. About how many are done, or what's the construction plan on those?

GEN. WALSH: Yeah, we have eight of them that are done and turned over to the Iraqis, and they're seeing about 250 patients a day, so that's working fairly good. We have another 10 that are turned over or ready to turn over to the Ministry of Health, and they're recruiting and training the staff for those -- for those 10.

There's another 80 clinics that are 90 percent complete, and we expect to turn those over in the next several months. So in Baghdad itself, we'll have a total of 30 primary health clinics that'll certainly help provide services here in this city.

MR. AXE: Great. Too, could we write -- could I write to say that most of them will be done by September? Would that be accurate, or what kind of date would you like to put on it?

GEN. WALSH: Yeah, I think most of them will be done by September. That'd be -- (word inaudible).

MR. AXE: Great. Thanks. Okay.

MR. FISHMAN: And general, just to follow up on that, when we see the news clips of the clinics being opened, you see the Iraqi government officials and U.S. troops cutting the ribbons, but inside, is there some kind of credit for the U.S. so that when we're not there people will even realize, you know, the billions of dollars that have been spent, or is it going to be a total Iraqi operation?

GEN. WALSH: No, there's not -- there's not a medallion or something like that that says this has been contributed by the -- by the American public. I think, as you walk

around the neighborhoods, people know who's been -- who's been building certain things, and certainly that memory will be with the people of Iraq.

MR. KILBRIDE: All right.

MR. AXE: Can I jump back, or does Jarred have another one?

MR. FISHMAN: No, go ahead.

MR. AXE: Okay, great. General, what about -- how are you doing on the water projects there? You were working, and very proudly so, on some of the water systems, sewage treatments and stuff. When I was in Ramadi, I was amazed how clean it was compared to, say, again, Januaryish. Are you -- is that pretty much finished now?

GEN. WALSH: Yeah, the water projects are going along fairly well. What we're also looking at is turning some of those projects over to -- over to the Iraqis. If you go down to Nasiriyah water treatment plant, that's a \$250 million water treatment plant that should be finished in the July time frame. That one's doing quite well. Actually, we're training the Iraqis to take over that. Up in Irbil is another water treatment plant that we finished for 200 million (dollars), and that will provide 6 million cubic meters per hour for the city of Irbil, which has a million people in it. So the water projects are going along well.

There is a little bit of a challenge in Fallujah right now, and we're working those particular challenges. One is some of those projects were done with food-for-oil funds, and we're working with the government of Iraq to release those funds so we can continue that project in Fallujah.

MR. AXE: Yeah. A stupid question, why would they not want to release the funds?

GEN. WALSH: It -- it's fairly complex. These are contracts that was let for the government of Iraq by the Americans, when there was CPA days. And so they're looking into details on whether they want to proceed with those contracts or not.

MR. AXE: Okay.

MR. FISHMAN: Okay, yeah, I'd just ask one follow-up. Just a general impression, general, sir, is from the time that you've been there versus now -- just from your interactions with the Iraqi citizenry and the National Guard forces and the Army forces. What's your general impression as far as improvements, things going wrong, things that need to still be improved?

GEN. WALSH: Well, certainly, again, I have to look at it from an engineering and a contracting, construction guy, and I've been doing this for 29 years. It takes a long time to put infrastructure together, and I'm not sure where you guys are, but if you're in

the D.C. area, you know, we've been working on the Woodrow Wilson Bridge since I've been a captain. If you look at the Mixing Bowl, we've been working on the Mixing Bowl since I've been a major. You know, the Boston (Big) Dig's been going on since as long as I've been alive, I think. (Laughter.)

So, you know, we've been at it for three years, and if people say, well, have you made a significant change in the infrastructure, I would say yes. But again, it's been under-funded for 25 years; we're not going to turn it around in three years, just like we're not going to put a water treatment plant or a power generation system back in the United States. There's still the law of physics that you just need to overcome and continue to work at it.

But generally, we've seen the electrical systems go up. Again, as I mentioned, about 13 hours of power. It was about 10 or 11 when I first got here. The primary health clinics, we hadn't turned any of them over, and we're about ready to turn those over. The Basra Children's Hospital, we have 700 people reporting to work every day, doing that construction project. So I think every day there's another chunk out of the work that we're providing for the Iraq people. But again, it's not something that's going to turn around in three years.

MR. KILBRIDE: Okay. Thank you, sir, for taking time so far. Do you have anything you want to say, just wrapping up?

GEN. WALSH: No, I'd just like to thank you all for taking time out of your days to write about the things that are going here in Iraq and on the reconstruction piece. It certainly -- there's not a lot that gets out about some of the good projects that we're working on and, as I've mentioned before, there's 3,200 projects that we've completed so far around the country. And that doesn't get enough ink, and I think we're really providing a great service for our nation and also the people of Iraq.

Thank you.

MR. KILBRIDE: All right. Thank you, sir.

MR. LUBIN: General, thanks -- general, thank you for the time. Appreciate it. Good to talk to you again, sir.

MR. KILBRIDE: All right.

GEN. WALSH: It's been good to talk to you again out here.

MR. KILBRIDE: For the record, today's program's going to be available on line at DefendAmerica.mil, with audio file, print, transcript and biography. The story's going to be written for American Forces Press Service and posted on the Department of Defense website, DefenseLink.mil. And if there are any questions about today's program, please contact DOD New Media Team at bloggeroutreach@hqu.afis.osd.mil.

Again, thank you to everybody who participated.

And thank you, General Walsh.

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